

Reopening the future: Advancing early learning for a better tomorrow ^[1]

A solid body of evidence shows that the foundations for learning are largely built in the early years of life, before a child ever enters primary school.

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At the height of national school closures in early April 2020, more than 180 million children had their pre-primary schooling disrupted due to COVID-19. A solid body of evidence shows that the foundations for learning are largely built in the early years of life, before a child ever enters primary school.

Children who fall behind in these early years often struggle to catch up with their peers, perpetuating a cycle of underachievement and high dropout rates that continues to harm vulnerable young people.

The youngest students lost the most days of schooling

A survey conducted by Vozes de Educação shows the wide variance in how countries have approached the reopening of early childhood education (ECE) settings. Among low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), pre-primary students lost an average of 106 in-person instruction days in 2020 - more than any other levels of schooling.

In comparison, the number of days lost for primary school students was 103 days, and 99 and 100 days lost for lower secondary and upper secondary students, respectively. Yet, fewer than a third of LMICs have planned to undertake an assessment of gaps in pre-primary learning that may have accumulated during the COVID-19 school closures.

The cost of inaction is high. Investment in early childhood education was already underfunded and under threat before the pandemic.

We know that for every dollar invested in quality ECE and affiliated services for disadvantaged children, there is a return of an additional 10 cents every year throughout that child's lifetime.

However, COVID-19 has further exacerbated the education gap, especially for ECE. Pre-primary school closures in 2020 are estimated to cost \$1.6 trillion USD in lost future earnings, the equivalent of 12 years of total international aid for development. Yet many LMICS are leaving pre-primary education out of their responses to COVID-19.

Guidance to build back resilient pre-primary settings

As schools reopen, we are presented with a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to build back resilient ECE systems. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 calls for all children to have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030.

Only through adequate investment in ECE can we reach our goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The ripple effects of investing in ECE as schools reopen will be felt long into the future.

Prioritizing ECE now will get more children learning (in school earlier and for longer), build stronger links with families, boost economies, contribute to gender equality, and in the long run, help create more sustainable, peaceful, and resilient societies.

The situation is critical, but the Global Guidance on Reopening ECE Settings, which is aligned with the Framework for Reopening Schools and WHO guidance, provides additional resources specifically for ECE settings.

Notably, there are 10 guiding principles that can help policymakers plan for and implement the reopening of ECE settings, focusing on safe operations, staff training and support, child well-being and development, and parental communication and support.

While the joint development of the Global Guidance is a starting point, it is important to continue to support families, teachers, school institutions, and governments/ministries during the reopening process (and beyond) to ensure that we are on track to achieve SDG 4.2.

UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank encourage governments, donors, and implementers to prioritize the reopening of pre-primary schools, resource recovery measures that systematically incorporate pre-primary education, and roll out transition programs to support children left out of pre-primary education in the wake of the pandemic.

Region: International [3]

Tags: COVID-19 [4]

COVID-19. economic recovery [5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/07/reopening-future-advancing-early-learning-better-tomorrow> [2]

<https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/reopening-future-advancing-early-learning-better-tomorrow> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9040> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9082>